THE FIRST RITUAL COMPLEX OF THE TENGINSKII BURIAL-GROUND

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The Kuban region is an extremely ancient ‘crossroads’. At the end of the 9th century BC a culture began to take shape south of the river, involving tribes with similar material cultures and funerary rites, which ancient authors referred to as the Maeotians. In the 6th century BC they still settled the south bank of the river. The latest sites of the Maeotian archaeological culture date from the 3rd century AD.

At present dozens of these sites (settlements and other sites) have already been studied: in addition several thousand flat-graves and approximately thirty sanctuaries have been discovered. 2

The sanctuaries constitute a special type of site. For a long time they were regarded as burials of leaders or of horsemen. Most of these complexes have been looted, but sometimes isolated or scattered human bones have been discovered. At the same time, it is precisely in these complexes that rich and often sensational finds have been made. All this served to complicate a reliable interpretation of the sites in question. After the Ul and Ulyap sanctuaries 3 had been investigated, many previously excavated sites became easier to understand, which had previously been regarded as burials of the Scythian nobility or tribal leaders of the Maeotians. However, even after sanctuaries had been defined as a separate site category, many questions linked with cults, funeral feasts and the accompanying rituals, in particular the question of human sacrifice, were not in the focus of scholars’ attention.

This article is the first detailed publication of a specific site of the Maeotian culture, which contained evidence of large-scale human sacrifices. The special importance of this particular discovery lies in the fact that it was not looted or destroyed as many of the sites studied previously had been.

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3 Leskov 1985, 26-44.
In 1998 the Caucasian Archaeological Expedition of the State Museum for the Arts of the Peoples of the East, led by the author of this article, continued its investigation of the flat-grave burial-ground on the western edge of Tenginskaya village in the Ust-Labinsk district of the Krasnodar region (Fig. 1). The site is situated on a high terrace along the north bank of the River Laba (one of the southern tributaries of the Kuban River).

Work was begun at this site at the end of the 1980s by Chernopitskii, when a pumping-station was being built. He investigated a Bronze Age burial-mound and the Maeotian flat-grave cemetery adjacent to it. Our expedition embarked upon its first season at the site in 1994. In the profile of a foundation ditch some half-destroyed burials had been discovered. A trench was excavated in an undisturbed area stretching from the edge of the ditch to the edge of the river terrace in the hope of establishing the limits of the site (Fig. 2). We began excavations at the western edge of the burial-ground and gradually proceeded eastwards. By 1998 approximately 140 structures relating to the Maeotian culture (3rd century BC – 2nd century AD) had been uncovered. The vast majority of these were flat-graves and some of them were horse burials – a typical feature of the flat-grave burial-grounds of the culture in question: small clusters of animal bones and pottery fragments were found.

As our research has shown, the edge of the terrace had shifted somewhat to the South over 2000 years, as a result of erosion, but the ancient edge of the terrace could clearly be made out in the profile of the ridges and this edge constituted the southern limit of the burial-ground.

The 1998 trench had been sunk at the highest point of the burial-ground almost at the edge of the ancient terrace. The surface of this area had been taken up by a vegetable garden, which was dug over every year. At a depth of 50 cm from the surface a feature was discovered, which was initially designated as Burial 140. While it was being cleared, it emerged that this complex was unique, containing evidence of human sacrifices, but it was decided not to change the overall sequence of numbers for the burial complexes. In 1999 another complex of a similar kind (Burial 164) was discovered. For simplicity’s sake we shall refer to Burial 140 as Ritual Complex No. 1 and Burial 164 as Ritual Complex No. 2. This article deals with the first Ritual Complex. Three further complexes were directly linked to it: Burial No. 139, Horse Burial No. 9 and Cluster of Horse Bones No. 11 (Fig. 3). The description of

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4 Chernopitskii 1988.